

Chapter One

De Casibus Tragedy: Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*

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Introduction

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
As olde books maken us memorie,
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.¹

So says Chaucer's monk in the prologue to his contribution to *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1388–1400). His tale represents the first notable English contribution to a tradition that began with an earlier fourteenth-century Latin work by Giovanni Boccaccio, the title of which is reproduced in the tale's headnote: '*Here bigynneth the Monkes Tale / De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* [on the fates of famous men]'.² Boccaccio's *De Casibus* (c. 1355–60) is a voluminous collection of exemplary prose narratives detailing the demise of great historical, biblical and mythological figures. The stories are varied and complex, but their overriding theme is the mutability of Fortune; they teach the powerful that what they might presume to be a permanent state of prosperity is in fact liable to be overturned at any moment and that in such circumstances it is unwise to invest heavily or take excessive pride in earthly matters. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the monk follows the Boccaccian model in offering his own much shorter set of tales, detailing the falls of figures from Lucifer to Croesus, but departs from Boccaccio in referring to them as tragedies. The monk's definition of the term differs in some important ways from the conventional, Aristotelian model of tragedy to which students of Renaissance literature are so often referred. Firstly, these tragedies are to be found in old

books rather than on the stage. Secondly, the monk tells us that tragedy deals in the fall of great men from prosperity to ruin, but gives no indication of why these men suffer this fate; in this kind of tragedy, the great man falls not as a logical and predictable result of a particular flaw or wrongdoing, but, conversely, as a demonstration of the arbitrary and illogical nature of earthly events.

Chaucer's tragic model is consistent with a widespread medieval understanding of tragedy as a genre of historical writing that encouraged a contempt for worldly matters by demonstrating the inconstancy of Fortune. According to this understanding, tragic downfalls are not punishments but expressions of the idea that Fortune ultimately catches up with all of us, whoever we might happen to be (although, as we will see, this model would often awkwardly co-exist within the same texts with a more providential logic). By the time the professional theatres were flourishing in late Elizabethan London, this notion of tragedy had lost its monopoly, as dramatists turned to classical precursors such as Seneca for inspiration. Nonetheless, the *de casibus* tradition continued to flourish in the second half of the sixteenth century, and continued to exert influence over the creative work of early modern dramatists. In this essay, as well as briefly tracing the genealogy of the *de casibus* tradition from Boccaccio to Elizabethan London, I will examine the influence of and engagement with the *de casibus* tradition in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587). In this reading, I aim to show that Marlowe's drama exploits a tension that lies at the heart of the all *de casibus* tragedy: namely that between understandings of worldly events as governed by divine providence, on the one hand, or by the whims of Fortune, on the other. Marlowe's indebtedness to the drama of the medieval period has been long established; here I hope to demonstrate the imaginative use he makes of the period's narrative and poetic tradition.

The English *de casibus* tradition

While ‘The Monk’s Tale’ is the earliest English engagement with *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*, the most significant contribution to the establishment of an English *de casibus* tradition was made by John Lydgate, who in 1431 began work on *The Fall of Princes*, an ambitious poetic translation of Boccaccio’s work. *The Fall of Princes* is both a loose and an indirect translation; Lydgate based his text on *Les Cas des nobles hommes et femmes*, a French translation — itself somewhat liberal — of Boccaccio’s *De Casibus* by Laurent de Premierfait. Lydgate makes considerable alterations to both the Latin and French versions, including the introduction of a framing narrative device in which the poem’s tragic figures, from Adam and Eve to John II of France, present themselves one after another and relate their stories to ‘John Bochas’, who is working on *De Casibus* in his study. Another crucial departure from Lydgate’s sources seems to have originated in a demand from his patron, Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, who stipulated that an ‘envoy’ — a short verse postscript — should be added to each narrative, detailing for the reader the political and ethical lessons to be gleaned from its events.³

Lydgate’s patronage by such a senior establishment figure, and the apparent attempt by that patron to enforce a degree of moral certitude on the poet’s work, have contributed to a sense, predominant for much of its critical history, that *The Fall of Princes* is essentially an exercise in bland conservatism, conceived in the service of established power and eked out on an unnecessarily grand scale.⁴ Of particular note is an exquisitely brutal literary-critical hatchet job by Joseph Ritson, who in his *Bibliographica Poetica* (1802) lamented the ‘stupid and fatigueing productions’ of ‘this voluminous, prosaic, and drivelling monk’.⁵ Nevertheless, the reputation of Lydgate, and of English poetry between Chaucer and Wyatt more broadly, has

undergone some rehabilitation since the latter part of the twentieth century, with critics beginning to observe a degree of subversive vitality and political engagement in the work.⁶

Whatever the vicissitudes of its modern critical afterlife, *The Fall of Princes* was an undoubted success at the time of its production, and for at least a century after that. Despite its ‘colossal length ... and the consequent expense of production’, A. S. G. Edwards notes that the poem ‘survives complete in nearly forty fifteenth-century manuscripts, many high quality productions’, and that these manuscripts ‘continued to be read into the sixteenth century’.⁷ Richard Pynson produced the first printed edition of the poem in 1494, and it was reprinted once in 1527 and three times in or around 1554. These would prove to be the last editions before the twentieth century.⁸ In 1555 an ultimately abortive project was underway to produce an edition of Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* with a continuation that both brought it up to date and turned its attention to English concerns. While this edition did not transpire — possibly as a result of official suppression — the preparations put in place for it would, four years later, give rise to the first edition of *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559).⁹

The *Mirror* was a project executed by a committee of writers headed by William Baldwin.¹⁰ While the *Mirror* was not, as had been initially planned, published as an extension of *The Fall of Princes*, Baldwin’s preface to the reader makes clear the influence of Lydgate’s poem both in the origin of the project and in the process of its completion; as well as noting the project’s original intention to go ‘from where as Bochas lefte, unto the presente time’, Baldwin notes that once his syndicate of seven co-authors was assembled, he ‘resorted vnto them, bering with me the booke of Bochas, translated by Dan Lidgate, for better obseruacion of his order’.¹¹ Despite this clear statement of its genealogy, however, the approach of the *Mirror* differs from that of the *Fall* in a number of interesting ways. The text dispenses with

Lydgate's envoys, instead interlinking the tragedies with prose sections in which Baldwin and his committee of writers discuss the aesthetic merits and ethical and political implications of what has preceded; while these discussions usually result in a consensus, this device allows a plurality of responses to each of the stories to be voiced in a way that is not facilitated by Lydgate's model. The tragedies themselves take on a more immediate form: the intermediary narrative device — 'Bochas' — is here dispensed with, and the subject of each tragedy instead narrates his or her own demise, in most cases finishing with a short lament that, along with the prose links, takes over some of the didactic functions of Lydgate's envoys. Fulfilling the promise to produce a *Fall of Princes* specifically focused on English concerns, the 1559 edition of the *Mirror* follows the events of the Wars of the Roses, from the reigns of Richard II to Edward IV, using Edward Hall's *Chronicles* as its principal source.¹²

The 1559 edition of *Mirror* was only the first instalment of a continually evolving project. There followed an edition of 1563, which added a new series of tragedies taking the narratives to the end of the reign of Richard III, and further adjustments occurred in an edition of 1578. Alongside this, what has tended to be considered an alternative *Mirror* tradition emerged in 1574, with the publication of John Higgins's *The First Part of the Mirror for Magistrates*, which applied the *de casibus* treatment to Britain's mythical past, from the country's founder Brutus to its defender against the invasions of Julius Caesar, Nennius. This work was published by Thomas Marshe, who subsequently reprinted the 'original' *Mirror* under the title *The Last Part of the Mirror for Magistrates*. Higgins's prequel was followed in 1578 by Thomas Blenerhasset's *The Second Part of The Mirror for Magistrates*, which continued the narrative to the reign of King Harold. The convoluted publication history of the *Mirror* took a final turn in 1587, around the time Marlowe was

enjoying his first public theatrical success with *Tamburlaine the Great*, when an edition was published which combined the ‘original’ *Mirror* with Higgins’s ‘*First Part*’, incorporated further additions but omitted Blenerhasset’s second part.¹³ The work also engendered a steady flow of imitations and responses: Willard Farnham identifies a significant number of such works that appeared in the latter quarter of the sixteenth century, including ten in the last two years of Marlowe’s life.¹⁴ To talk about *The Mirror for Magistrates*, then, is to talk not about a single work with a unilateral ethical and aesthetic identity but about an evolving, polyvocal and textually unstable tradition. It was a collaborative project which quickly outgrew its original conceptual boundaries and underwent a thirty-year process of emendation, re-iteration, and appropriation. This process helped to ensure that tragic verse narratives concerning the instability of worldly fortune enjoyed a period of vitality in England that was relatively unbroken from the late fourteenth century to the emergence of tragedy on the public stages in the late sixteenth century.

Providence and Fortune

Lydgate’s *Fall* is explicit from its outset regarding the determining role Fortune will play in the work. The work’s prologue states the author’s hope that ‘sundry princes’, upon reading the work, would understand

That thinges all where fortune may attayne
Be transitorye of condicion
for she of kynde is hasty and sodeyn
Contrariouse her course for to restreyne
Of wilfulnesse she is so variable
Whan men moost trust than is she moost chaungable¹⁵

Likewise, in the prologue to the *Mirror*, Baldwin relates how the work's printer had asked him

to procure to haue the storye contynewed from where as Bochas lefte, vnto this presente time, chiefly of suche as Fortune had dalyed with here in this ylande: which might be as a myrrour for al men as well noble as others, to show the slyppery deceytes of the waueryng lady, and the due reward of all kinde of vices.¹⁶

The fickleness of Fortune is ostensibly the root from which the moral universe of the *de casibus* tradition springs; the reader should learn that the pursuit, and even the attainment, of earthly power is at best precarious and at worst futile, since Fortune's defining characteristic is that she is always liable to execute a 'sodeyn' and 'slyppery' redistribution of her favour. The enduring visual encapsulation of this idea is, of course, her wheel, on which those who are carried to the top are soon guaranteed a sharp descent. From these stories, the respective prologues suggest, a reader will come to understand that the concerns of this world ought to be held in contempt, since terrestrial success or failure depend not on merit or culpability, but on the arbitrary whims of Fortune. Better to live a simple life devoted to the consideration of spiritual truths and devotion to God, whose realm is not subject to the mutability that reigns in the sublunary world.

This *contemptus mundi* morality, and its manifestation in the *de casibus* tradition from Boccaccio onwards, owes a great deal to Boethius's sixth-century work *The Consolation of Philosophy*, in which Fortune's wheel makes its earliest known appearance. In *The Consolation*, the imprisoned and condemned Boethius is transfigured from a state of lamentation to one of enlightenment by a debate with Lady Philosophy, who teaches him that the losses he so keenly feels are not really losses at all:

I know the many disguises of that monster, Fortune, and the extent to which she seduces with friendship the very people she is striving to cheat, until she overwhelms them with grief at the suddenness of her desertion. If you can recall to mind her character, her methods, and the kind of favour she proffers, you will see that in her you did not have and did not lose anything of value.¹⁷

Through his dialogue with Philosophy, Boethius comes to realise that material fortune is essentially meaningless, and that the true good resides in philosophical and spiritual wisdom: ‘Why’, asks Philosophy, ‘do you mortal men seek after happiness outside yourselves, when it lies within you?’.¹⁸ It is in Boethius that *contemptus mundi* philosophy, argued on the basis of the earthly sovereignty of Fortune, is given its most sophisticated and enduring expression, and it is an expression of this philosophy with which the late-medieval *de casibus* authors were familiar; Chaucer translated the text into middle English, a fact to which Lydgate refers in the prologue to *The Fall*.¹⁹

In inheriting this Boethian world view, however, the *de casibus* authors also inherited a problem with which Boethius himself wrestles in the *Consolation*. The idea of Fortune’s predominance over earthly concerns provides a clear logical basis for holding the world in contempt, but it also sits rather uncomfortably alongside any notion of divine providence. If God is truly omnipotent, how can the responsibility for earthly successes and failures be attributed to an entirely arbitrary force? If God knows all, he must know all future events, which in turn means that their occurrence must already have been pre-established; but how can events be simultaneously random and preordained? While Boethius attributes earthly successes and failures to the ‘domineering hand’ of Fortune, he is unwilling to accept the apparently logical conclusion that arises from this: that earthly affairs, since governed by chance, lie outside the remit of God’s plan.²⁰ Boethius tackles this problem with a discussion

of temporal metaphysics. Since God is eternal, he experiences time in a different manner to those who are not eternal; those belonging to the latter group live through time in a linear fashion, moving from a past that has happened into a future that is yet to exist. In contrast, Boethius has Philosophy define the eternal as ‘the *complete, simultaneous* and *perfect* possession of everlasting life’;²¹ to be eternal is not simply to live forever, but to live an existence that encompasses all eternity at once, in an eternal present. Therefore, the argument goes, God’s knowledge of what for a mortal being is a future event does not render it *predetermined*, as His knowledge of it is not, strictly speaking, *foreknowledge*. As such, God can possess eternal knowledge of events without predetermining their occurrence, and, accordingly, his omnipotence need not obviate the earthly tyranny of Fortune.²²

The late medieval and early modern *de casibus* authors who drew inspiration from Boethius were less able, however, to neatly reconcile the idea of a world governed by Fortune with that of a world in which Earthly misdeeds are visited with divine punishment. The standard position in the limited early-twentieth century criticism on the *de casibus* tradition was to suggest that in its late-medieval manifestation — in Chaucer and Lydgate — it maintained a *contemptus mundi* morality based on Fortune, while in its early modern manifestations — the various iterations of the *Mirror* — it gravitated towards a morality based on a direct providential relationship between the wickedness of one’s actions and the grisliness of one’s fate. Henry H. Adams states, for example, that ‘during the sixteenth century the idea of fortune gradually retreated in the minds of writers, to be replaced by that of God’s retributive justice’.²³ According to this view, the tradition begins with Boccaccio adhering strictly to Fortune as the motivating logic informing his narratives, develops via Lydgate, who retains a predominantly Fortune-based morality but who introduces a providential reasoning to a number of his tragedies, and culminates in the *Mirror*, which pays lip service to the whims of

Fortune but which ultimately settles on a monitory rationale based on divine retribution (note that in the passage quoted above Baldwin promises to show *both* the ‘slyppery deceytes of the waueryng lady’ *and* ‘the due reward of all kinde of vices’).²⁴ This shift was, according to an influential study by Willard Farnham, accompanied by a related move away from a medieval-minded contempt for the world, which Fortune was so useful in fostering, and towards a more Renaissance-minded worldliness informed by humanism and emergent notions of individualism.²⁵

As interest in the *de casibus* tradition has revived since the late twentieth century, though, the linearity of this progression from Fortune to providence, and from contempt for the world to worldliness, has been increasingly called into question. As early as 1949, William Peery made a case for the *Mirror* being much less unilaterally providentialist in its outlook than the critical consensus had previously asserted, while three decades later Frederick Kiefer argued that Fortune and providence play oppositional yet complementary roles in the text, the former serving to provide an ethical rationale in those narratives where the historical source material appears resistant to a providential explication.²⁶ The earlier end of the linear progression from Fortune to providence has also been subjected to complication by recent criticism: Nigel Mortimer identifies the co-existence in *The Fall of Princes* of envoys attributing the events of its narratives on the one hand to Fortune and on the other to Providence, while Paul Strohm argues that Lydgate’s poem infuses the *contemptus mundi* narratives which he inherited from Boccaccio and Premierfait with a proto-Machiavellian interest in worldly pragmatism.²⁷ From the early days of its introduction into English literary culture, then, the *de casibus* tragedy is a polyvalent phenomenon, characterised by competing ethical and theological ways of understanding the events of history. Inherent to the genre, in particular, are tensions along two axes: one between earthly Fortune and divine providence, and another between contempt

for the world and a concerted interest in terrestrial matters. Taking Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* as a case in point, I aim to show some of the ways in which Elizabethan stage tragedy made extensive creative use of these tensions.

***Tamburlaine the Great* and the *de casibus* tradition**

To read the two parts of *Tamburlaine the Great* as *de casibus* tragedy — or at least as representing an engagement with the *de casibus* tradition — is to take an unusual but not a unique approach. Two critics who have conducted such readings are Willard Farnham, as part of his large-scale study of the 'medieval heritage' of early modern drama, and, more recently, Troni Y. Grande.²⁸ Both critics read the plays as recalling but in one way or another wilfully undermining the moral logic of *de casibus* tragedy. Farnham goes as far as to describe *Tamburlaine* as 'a medieval tragedy reversed, a rebellious violation of all that *De Casibus* tragedy had set out to convey'.²⁹ Where the *de casibus* tradition promoted a contempt for, or at the very least a suspicion of, earthly achievements, Marlowe 'gave himself completely to a drama of untrammelled worldly success'.³⁰ In a similar reading, Grande contends that the plays generate a radical ambiguity by interweaving conventions belonging to two distinct and contradictory genres: on the one hand, *de casibus* tragedy, which for Grande demands that the protagonist's earthly pride should occasion a fitting and monitory punishment, and, on the other, an instance of an emergent 'heroic tragedy', which unashamedly valorises its protagonist's worldly achievements. Both of these readings are illuminating and inform much of what follows, but my own reading will depart from them in a couple of important ways. Firstly, Farnham's interpretation in particular relies upon an understanding of *Tamburlaine* as an unequivocal celebration of its protagonist's achievements. Criticism on the plays over the

last thirty years has done much to complicate that notion, and a reading of the play in relation to the *de casibus* tradition needs to account for the work's now widely recognised moral ambiguity.³¹ Secondly, where Grande conceives of the *Tamburlaine* plays as exhibiting a generic tension between a straightforwardly providential version of *de casibus* tragedy and a heroic form of tragedy that runs directly counter to it, I read the plays as exploiting and manipulating tensions between competing conceptions of tragedy that are already present within the *de casibus* tradition.

Regardless of what conclusions one draws from them, the parallels with and allusions to the *de casibus* tradition are numerous in the *Tamburlaine* plays. In its closing lines, the prologue encourages the audience to 'View but his picture in this tragic glass / And then applaud his fortunes as you please' (I.Prologue.7–8), simultaneously evoking the notion of tragedy-as-mirror — a notion doubtless reinvigorated by the recent publication of a new edition of *Mirror for Magistrates* — and alluding to the concept of fortune. Fortune is a subject to which the plays return with metronomic regularity, as characters variously celebrate, bemoan, defy or appeal to her primacy. Some of these references are made in passing and suggest a presumption of Fortune's supremacy: early in the first part, for example, Menaphon counsels Cosroe not to lament the incompetent kingship of his brother, Mycetes, 'Since Fortune gives you opportunity / To gain the title of a conqueror / By curing of this maimèd empery' (I.1.1.124–26), while in the opening scene of the second the Natolian king Orcanes reveals the true nature of his fears: 'Slavonians, Almains, Rutters, Muffs and Danes / Fear not Orcanes, but great Tamburlaine — / Nor he, but Fortune that hath made him great' (II.1.1.58–60). A more sustained appeal to a traditional *de casibus* understanding of Fortune is made by Callapine, who in anticipation of his final confrontation with the Scythian conqueror takes comfort from the deity's renowned mutability:

We shall not need to nourish any doubt
But that proud Fortune, who hath followed long
The martial sword of mighty Tamburlaine,
Will now retain her old inconstancy
And raise our honours to as high a pitch
In this our strong and fortunate encounter

(II.3.1.27–32)

For Callapine, Tamburlaine's downfall is inevitable, not because of any providential sense of deserved punishment, but simply because this is how Fortune works: wherever her favour lies today, it will lie somewhere else tomorrow.

Of course, Callapine's faith in Fortune turns out to be misplaced, as Tamburlaine soon adds him to his list of vanquished enemies. In one sense this accords entirely with the *de casibus* notion of Fortune's slipperiness; the moment Callapine puts his faith in Fortune's capriciousness working in his favour is the moment that she begins to appear unwaveringly constant in her favouring of Tamburlaine. To place one's trust in Fortune, even if that is to trust her to be untrustworthy, is to seal one's own fate. But at the same time as Callapine is given this lesson in *de casibus* morality — indeed, as a necessary condition of Callapine receiving this lesson — Tamburlaine seems to be exempt from its rules, as Fortune's favouring of him appears to continue unabated. Tamburlaine's audacious declaration early in the first part that 'I hold the fates bound fast in iron chains / And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about' (I.1.2.173–74) sends a clear signal to readers or audiences familiar with the *de casibus* tradition that an impending fall is likely, and elsewhere in the Marlowe canon this kind of expectation turns out to be justified: a similar boast made by Mortimer Jr in *Edward*

II is almost immediately succeeded by his downfall, for example.³² But, as Grande's reading of the play notes, Tamburlaine's 'punishment' for his imperious dismissal of Fortune is either unusually dilatory or even arguably never transpires at all. Indeed, such is the absence of any repercussion for his claims that the plays' other characters begin to believe and even echo them, most notably when Anippe reassures a concerned Zenocrate with the following appeal:

Madam, content yourself and be resolved
Your love hath Fortune so at his command
That she shall stay, and turn her wheel no more
As long as life maintains his mighty arm
That fights for honour to adorn your head.

(I.5.1.373–77)

According to this view, Fortune has effectively ceased to be Fortune, and her characteristic instability has been transformed into stasis. As well as dismissing Fortune herself, Tamburlaine directly contradicts the *contemptus mundi* morality that *de casibus* tragedy traditionally uses her to elucidate: in the plays' most famous speech, he declares that 'Nature, that framed us of four elements / Warring within our breasts for regiment, / Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds', and that, as a result of this, no prize can be greater valued than 'the ripest fruit of all, / That perfect bliss and sole felicity, / The sweet fruition of an earthly crown' (I.2.7.18–20; 27–29). It is difficult to imagine a more eloquent expression of precisely the kind of thinking at which Fortune-based *de casibus* tragedy took aim, yet for another eight acts Tamburlaine's successes continue to pile one upon the other.

It is also striking that Tamburlaine's achievements are of a kind specifically singled out for condemnation in Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*. Much is made in the first act of Tamburlaine's

modest origins, as he volubly espouses a meritocratic world view, asserting to Zenocrate that ‘I am a lord, and so my deeds shall prove, / And yet a shepherd by my parentage’, before memorably rendering this idea visible by exchanging his shepherd’s weeds for ‘complete armour’ and ‘curtle axe’ (I.1.2.34–35; 42). But Tamburlaine’s stage-managed metamorphosis, however impressive, cannot entirely divest him of the spectre of his low birth; as Orcanes reminds him in the third act of part two, for all of his power, he remains, in the eyes of those with whom he presumes to seek war, a ‘shepherd’s issue, base-born Tamburlaine’ (II.3.5.77). That Tamburlaine’s origin is raised both by himself and his opponents is significant in a *de casibus* context, since this places him in a category of individual singled out by Lydgate as being most likely to suffer a precipitous fall. In his narrative detailing the rise to power of Flavius Rufinus, ‘chamberlain’ to the eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius I, Lydgate notes that ‘Hye clymbinge up hath oft an unware fall / And specyally whan it is sodeyn / fro lowe degre to estate imperiall’; such is the fate of those who ‘have forget the grounde of their gynnynge’.³³ Another of Lydgate’s instances of sudden social climbing results in a particularly resonant outcome in terms of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* plays. In the narrative of the Byzantine emperor Romanos IV Diogenes, a knight who propelled himself into power by marrying the widow of Constantine, a reversal of this great fortune is occasioned by the arrival of Alp Arslan (rendered here as ‘Belset Tarquynyan’), the sultan of the Seljuk empire. After being defeated in battle, Diogenes suffers the following indignity at the hands of his conqueror:

Take he was and brought by great disdeyne
 In whom as tho there was no resistence
 To kynge belset called tar[q]uynyan
 And whan he cam to his p^rsence
 Ageyns him was yove this sentence

To lye down plat and that kinge belset
Shulde take his fote and on his throte set

This was done for an hye despyte
Dyogenes brought forth on a cheyne
without reverence favoure or respite
At great festys assigned was his payne
And aldrelaste put out his iyen twene
The whele of fortune tourneth as a ball
Sodeyn clymbynge axeth a sodeyn fall³⁴

This passage anticipates Tamburlaine's notorious treatment of Bajazeth in part one of Marlowe's play: he, too, is used as a footstool by his conqueror, and is presented captive, 'without reverence favoure or respite' at a lavish feast. I do not wish to suggest that this episode in Lydgate represents an undiscovered source for Marlowe's play; the humiliation of Bajazeth is detailed in a number of sixteenth-century chronicles that have been identified as likely sources of inspiration for the scene.³⁵ But the parallels between Lydgate's narrative and the Bajazeth episodes in the play are noteworthy, not least in terms of the moral interpretation that Lydgate appends to the story: Diogenes's humiliation is another exemplar of the *de casibus* notion that a rapid elevation in status often precedes an equally swift demise. What is particularly interesting is that both of Marlowe's most universally accepted sources interpret the humiliation of Bajazeth in a similar manner. Thomas Fortescue's *The Forest*, which translates material from Pedro Mexia's 1542 chronicle *Silva de Varia Leci6n*, recounts how Bajazeth was

presented to the great Tamburlaine, who incontinently closed him up in a cage of iron, carrying him still with him whithersoever he after went, pasturing him with the

crumbs that fell from his table, and with other bad morsels, as he had been a dog.

Whence assuredly we may learn not so much to affy in riches, or in the pomp of this world, for as much as he that yesterday was prince and lord of all the world almost, is this day fallen into such extreme misery that he liveth worse than a dog³⁶

Marlowe's other main source, Petrus Perondinus's chronicle *Magni Tamerlanis Scytharum Imperatoris Vita* (1553), extracts from the episode a similar lesson:

He would humiliate him by using him as a mounting-block, stepping on to his back as he crouched; when he ate, he kept him tied up like a dog under a three-legged table, to be the butt of all as he ate the crumbs and scraps. For the rest of the time he was kept in an iron cage like a wild animal, a pitiable spectacle, a prime example of human affairs and of the fickleness of Fortune.³⁷

Crucially, this renders Tamburlaine a bifurcated figure in *de casibus* terms. As a shepherd who has risen to imperial heights he is an example *par excellence* of the kind of rapid social climbing and pride in earthly matters that 'ought' to precede a swift turn of Fortune's wheel, yet as a humiliator of proud emperors he is also an instrument through which Fortune makes such turns of the wheel at the expense of others. Owing in a most obvious sense to their status as drama, the plays lack the narrative voice that serves in Marlowe's sources to expound the moral significance of Tamburlaine's deeds. But for a brief moment Tamburlaine's position on the knife-edge between finding himself Fortune's agent and Fortune's fool is clearly articulated, when Zenocrate retreats from the scene of her husband's slaughter of the virgins at Damascus to find the brained corpses of Bajazeth and Zabina:

Those that are proud of fickle empery
And place their chiefest good in earthly pomp —
Behold the Turk and his great emperess!

Ah Tamburlaine my love, sweet Tamburlaine,
That fightest for sceptres and for slippery crowns,
Behold the Turk and his great emperess!

(I.5.1.353–58)

Zenocrate's plea is a clear articulation of the logic of Fortune-based *de casibus* tragedy, confirming the significance of episodes in the play that audience members would have already recognised as tropes from the narrative tragic tradition. Yet for all that Zenocrate might seem like the best candidate for a moral *raisonneur* in the plays, the continued successes of the succeeding five acts do not seem to bear out her warning. Instead, the plays repeatedly evoke the fortunal logic of *de casibus* tragedy in order to apparently undermine it.

One reason that the plays do not explicitly follow through on the *contemptus mundi* morality that they seem at times to be espousing is that, as in collections of *de casibus* narratives like *The Fall of Princes* and *The Mirror for Magistrates*, the sublunary supremacy of Fortune faces competition in this play-world from an understanding of the world based on more directly providential divine intervention. Sigismund, after his defeat at the hands of Gazellus and Orcanes, against whom he has conspired dishonourably, interprets his fall in this way, acknowledging that 'God hath thundered vengeance from on high / For my accursed and hateful perjury' (II.2.3.2–3). The clarity of Sigismund's providential thinking is not characteristic of the play as a whole, however; just a few lines later, for example, Sigismund's enemies consider a range of authorities to whom the same event might be attributed. The Muslim Orcanes, noting that 'Christ or Mahomet hath been my friend' (II.2.3.11), considers the possibility that his victory over his Christian opponent could be attributed either to the support of the prophet associated with his own faith, or to Christ's punishment of the falsehood of one his own followers. Gazellus's response to this suggests a

third, demystifying explanation: ‘’Tis but the fortune of the wars, my lord, / Whose power is often proved [i.e. understood as] a miracle’ (II.2.3.31–32). Gazellus suggests that to attribute the outcome of the battle to any deity or prophet is to rationalise after the fact what are merely random events (as the lower case ‘f’ implies, Gazellus employs the term ‘fortune’ to refer simply to luck). In the space of a few lines, then, one materialistic and two alternative providential interpretations of the same event are offered.

The question of direct divine intervention is equally ambiguous when considered in relation to the plays’ protagonist. Just as the plays relate the idea of Tamburlaine doing the work of Fortune, they also allow him to present himself as an instrument of God’s punishment. As Roy Battenhouse notes, Tamburlaine evokes a providential theological tradition by styling himself as a ‘scourge of God’, from whom the wicked receive their divine retribution.³⁸ In one of several examples of this kind of self-projection, Tamburlaine, faced with a horrified response to the killing of his son, Calyphas, explains to the king of Jerusalem that ‘I execute, enjoined me from above, / To scourge the pride of such as Heaven abhors’, before describing himself a few lines later as ‘The scourge of God and terror of the world’ (II.4.1.148–49; 154). Mark Hutchings observes in the phrase a ‘beautiful ambiguity’, positioning Tamburlaine as both one who scourges on behalf of God and one who scourges God;³⁹ Tamburlaine demonstrates at various points attitudes that seem to accord with both interpretations of the phrase, asserting near the beginning of part one that any who attempted to strike him with a sword would find that ‘Jove himself will stretch his hand from heaven / To ward the blow and shield me safe from harm’ (I.1.2.179–80), and near the end of part one that ‘Jove, viewing me in arms, looks pale and wan, / Fearing my power should pull him from his throne’ (I.5.1.453–54).⁴⁰ As with his braving of Fortune, no direct consequence seems to emerge from this direct affront to divine authority. The question of providence, and the

source from which it may or may not derive, is thus left unresolved by these plays; specific events are attributed variously to the intervention of different deities and to the vagaries of chance, and outrageous acts of hubris that might be expected to elicit a providential response pass by without incident.

Crucially, however, while the plays undermine and complicate both the fortunal and providential frameworks of *de casibus* tragedy, they do not dismiss them altogether. Indeed, in the climactic (or perhaps anti-climactic) scenes of the second part, the sequence of events surrounding Tamburlaine's death and the manner of their staging make available both a providential and a *contemptus mundi* reading, albeit in an oblique fashion. This sequence of events ostensibly, although not unquestionably, begins shortly after Tamburlaine's defeat of Babylon when, apparently struck by the lack of either divine or mortal resistance to his military advances against his Muslim enemies, the conqueror stages a burning of the Qu'uran and challenges Mohammad to take vengeance on him. In doing so, Tamburlaine both dismisses the providential capacity of one religious authority and claims to act on behalf of another:

In vain, I see, men worship Mahomet:
My sword hath sent millions of Turks to hell,
Slew all his priests, his kinsmen, and his friends,
And yet I live untouched by Mahomet.
There is a God full of revenging wrath,
From whom the thunder and the lightning breaks,
Whose scourge I am, and him will I obey.
So, Casane, fling them in the fire.

(II.5.1.178–85)

Thirty-two lines later, Tamburlaine begins to come down with a vaguely defined complaint, the cause of which is treated by the warlord and his lieutenant as a puzzling mystery:

TAMBURLAINE: But stay, I feel myself distempered suddenly.

TECHELLES: What is it dares distemper Tamburlaine?

TAMBURLAINE: Something, Techelles, but I know not what

(II.5.1.217–19)

Placed directly alongside his provocation of Mohammad, the bafflement of Tamburlaine and Techelles takes on an absurdly comic quality, but in the context of the play the time elapsed between the provocation and the onset of the fatal distemper, coupled with the refusal of the play or any of its characters to explicitly link the former with the latter, has been sufficient to produce disagreement among critics as to the nature of the malady. J. B. Steane, for example, reads the episode providentially, stating that ‘if any placing can be assumed to be pointed and deliberate, this can’, while Daniel Vitkus, who refers to the plays’ ‘anti-providentialism’, suggests that ‘Tamburlaine’s death is caused by a radically material disease of the body, an elemental imbalance that is not produced by anything above or beyond his own physical anatomy’.⁴¹

What is significant in relation to the present discussion is that, just as in the case of the fall of Sigismund, the cause of Tamburlaine’s demise is the subject of a profound uncertainty; the plays refuse to assert a correct moral or theological interpretation of their protagonist’s death, making equally plausible the suggestions that it is the result solely of an arbitrarily occurring physiological disorder or of a direct divine response to an act of hubris. Crucially, these competing interpretations of the plays’ climax correlate with the competing moral logics at work in the *de casibus* tradition. Reading Tamburlaine’s death as a direct outcome of his vaunts against Mohammad, of course, places the plays into a providential framework,

however belated the punishment may be. (And how typically provocative of Marlowe to construct events in such a way that if one reads Tamburlaine's fall in these terms, it is an affront not to God or Christ but to Mohammad that has finally occasioned heavenly intervention.) If, however, Tamburlaine's distemper is not the product of divine intervention, then its sudden onset — at the point where Tamburlaine's power and pride seem to be at their peak — is an example of exactly the kind of arbitrariness of events for which Fortune stands as a metaphor. Whether or not Tamburlaine recognises a *contemptus mundi* moral to his own death — his declaration that 'In vain I strive and rail against those powers / That mean t'invest me in a higher throne, / As much too high for this disdainful earth' suggests that he understands it rather differently (II.5.3.120–22) — the spectacle of this hitherto indestructible man on his deathbed, brought low by illness and counting on a map the conquests he has failed to achieve, is bound to provoke some audiences to consider the absurdity of earthly ambition and pride in terrestrial achievements.

Rather than evoking a monolithic sense of the *de casibus* tradition in order to undermine it, then, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* exploits an unresolved generic and theological tension that is inherent in the *de casibus* tradition itself. *De casibus* tragedy, with its conflicting models based on Fortune and providence — each promoting mutually incompatible notions of earthly causality — exhibits a spiritual confusion that is put to creative use by Marlowe in the construction of the profoundly agnostic world of these plays, which repeatedly ask but pointedly refuse to answer questions about the extent of divine involvement in mundane lives.

Notes

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Prologue of The Monk's Tale', *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, third edition, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 240–41, ll. 1971–81.

² *Ibid.*, p. 241.

³ See Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Fall of Princys Princessys and Other Nobles*, trans. by John Lydgate (London: Richard Pynson, 1494; repr. Norwood NJ.: 1976), sig. F3v. In listing Boccaccio as author I follow the facsimile edition, but as should be clear, this is a problematic attribution. Duke Humphrey would himself go on to feature as a character both in *de casibus* tragedy and on the Shakespearean stage: see Lily B. Campbell, ed., *The Mirror for Magistrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938; repr. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), pp. 445–60, and William Shakespeare, *1 & 2 Henry VI*, in *Complete Works*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1098–1235.

⁴ On Lydgate's critical reception see Nigel Mortimer, *John Lydgate's 'Fall of Princes': Narrative Tragedy in its Literary and Political Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 1–24, and David Lawton, 'Dullness and the Fifteenth Century', *English Literary History* 54.4 (1987), pp. 761–799. On the length of the poem, see Mortimer, p. 1.

⁵ Joseph Ritson, *Bibliographica Poetica: A Catalogue of the Engleish Poets of the Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth Centurys, With a Short Account of Their Works* (London: C. Roworth, 1802), pp. 87–88.

⁶ See Lawton, 'Dullness', Paul Strohm, *Politique: Languages of Statecraft between Chaucer and Shakespeare* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), and Mortimer, *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes*.

⁷ A. S. G. Edwards, 'Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*: Translation, Re-translation and History', in *Renaissance Cultural Crossroads: Translation, Print and Culture in Britain, 1473-1640*, ed. by Sara K. Barker and Brenda M. Hosington (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 21–34 (p. 24).

⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

⁹ On the possible suppression of the 1555 edition see Campbell, ed., *Mirror for Magistrates* (pp. 3–16); John Thompson, 'Reading Lydgate in Post-Reformation England', in *Middle English Poetry: Texts and Traditions*, ed. by A. J. Minnis (York: York Medieval Press, 2001), pp. 181–209; and Alexandra Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate and their Books, 1473–1557* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 214–28, and Strohm, *Politique*, pp. 109–10.

¹⁰ On the authorship of the *Mirror*, see Campbell, ed., *Mirror for Magistrates* (pp. 21–48).

¹¹ Campbell, ed., *The Mirror for Magistrates*, pp. 68–69. 'Dan' was a title used to address both members of religious orders and men of poetic or intellectual distinction. The term might have been meant in either or both senses here (*OED* 'Dan', n.1).

¹² Baldwin and his co-authors also consulted histories by Fabian and Sir Thomas More, but 'wherever the chronicles disagreed, the authors accepted the authority of Halle'. Campbell,

Mirror, p. 10. See also Scott Lucas, 'Hall's Chronicle and the *Mirror for Magistrates*: History and the Tragic Pattern', in *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature*, ed. by Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 356–71.

¹³ On the publication history of the *Mirror*, see Campbell, *Mirror*, pp. 3–20, and *Parts Added to the Mirror for Magistrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), pp. 3–28, 363–77. Campbell notes the existence of a further *Mirror* edition in 1610, arranged by Richard Niccols, but argues that it 'cannot be integrated into the tradition'. 'Niccols', Campbell states, 'played Colley Cibber to the *Mirror*' (p. 20).

¹⁴ Willard Farnham, 'The Progeny of *A Mirror for Magistrates*', *Modern Philology* 29.4 (1932), pp. 395–410.

¹⁵ Boccaccio, *Fall of Princes*, sig. a2v.

¹⁶ Campbell, ed., *Mirror*, p. 68, ll. 4–8.

¹⁷ Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. by V. E. Watts (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 54.

¹⁸ Boethius, *Consolation*, p. 63.

¹⁹ See Boccaccio, *Fall of Princes*, sig. A3v. Mortimer states that Chaucer's indebtedness to Boethius 'is clearly attested not only by his translation of the *Consolation*, but also by his other works'. See *John Lydgate's 'Fall of Princes'*, p. 165. The continuation of the

Consolation's influence and popularity into and throughout the sixteenth century is suggested by the fact that Elizabeth I translated it as a private intellectual exercise in 1593: see Lysbeth Benkert, 'Translation as Image-Making: Elizabeth I's Translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*', *EMLS* 6.3 (2001), 2.1–20 < <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/06-3/benkboet.htm> > [accessed 7 August 2017].

²⁰ Boethius, *Consolation*, p. 56.

²¹ Boethius, *Consolation*, (my emphasis), p. 163.

²² Boethius, *Consolation*, p. 168.

²³ Henry H. Adams, *English Domestic or Homiletic Tragedy, 1575 to 1642* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 21. Campbell, similarly argues in her edition of the *Mirror* that the work 'substitutes an analysis of divine justice for the older philosophizing on the uncertainty of fortune'. Campbell, ed. *Mirror*, p. 56. See also Campbell, *Tudor Conceptions of History and Tragedy in 'The Mirror for Magistrates'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936), pp. 17–18.

²⁴ Campbell, ed., *Mirror*, p. 68, ll. 7–8.

²⁵ See William Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936; repr. Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).

²⁶ See William Peery, 'Tragic Retribution in the 1559 *Mirror for Magistrates*', *Studies in Philology* 46.2 (1949), pp. 113–30, and Frederick Kiefer, 'Fortune and Providence in the *Mirror for Magistrates*', *Studies in Philology* 74.2 (1977), pp. 146–64.

²⁷ See Mortimer, *John Lydgate's 'Fall of Princes'*, pp. 59–61, and Strohm, *Politique*, pp. 87–132.

²⁸ See Farnham, *Medieval Heritage*, pp. 368–76 and Troni Y. Grande, *Marlovian Tragedy: The Play of Dilation* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), pp. 44–72.

²⁹ Farnham, p. 369.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 373.

³¹ For recent readings that stress the moral ambiguity of the militaristic achievements dramatised in the *Tamburlaine* plays, see Nina Taunton, *1590s Drama and Militarism: Portrayals in Marlowe, Chapman and Shakespeare's 'Henry V'* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 58–62 and *passim*; Alan Shepard, *Marlowe's Soldiers: Rhetorics of Masculinity in the Age of the Armada* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 21–52; Robert A. Logan, 'Violence, Terrorism, and War in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* Plays', in *War and Words: Horror and Heroism in the Literature of Warfare*, ed. by Sara Munson Deats, Lagretta Tallent Lenker and Merry G. Perry (Lanham, MD.: Lexington, 2004), pp. 65–82. On *Tamburlaine* as a more generally paradoxical figure, see Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 45–

75 and Sara Munson Deats, 'Mars or Gorgon? *Tamburlaine* and *Henry V*', *Marlowe Studies* 1 (2011), 99–124.

³² See Christopher Marlowe, *Edward the Second*, ed. by Martin Wiggins and Robert Lindsey (London: A & C Black, 1997), 25.59–63.

³³ Boccaccio, *Fall*, sig. D6.

³⁴ Boccaccio, *Fall*, sig. F4v.

³⁵ See Thomas and Tydeman, *The Plays and Their Sources*, pp. 69–81, for an account of the various possible sources for the plays.

³⁶ Thomas and Tydeman, *The Plays and Their Sources*, pp. 86–87.

³⁷ Thomas and Tydeman, *The Plays and Their Sources*, p. 109. The Latin source is rendered here in the translation provided by Thomas and Tydeman.

³⁸ Roy W. Battenhouse, 'Tamburlaine, the "Scourge of God"', *PMLA* 56.2 (1941), 337–48. See also Andrew Hadfield, 'Tamburlaine as the "Scourge of God" and *The First English Life of King Henry the Fifth*', *Notes and Queries* 50.4 (2003), pp. 399–400.

³⁹ Mark Hutchings, 'Marlowe's "Scourge of God"', *Notes and Queries* 51.3 (2004), pp. 244–47 (p. 246).

⁴⁰ See Andrew Duxfield, *Christopher Marlowe and the Failure to Unify* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 50–54.

⁴¹ See J. B. Steane, *Christopher Marlowe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 115, n. 1, and Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, pp. 59, 63.